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# The Alamo's Selected Past

Each historic site in the United States claims its place within the time line of American history via uniqueness. Similarities to other sites are downplayed or ignored to allow the site to project its individual contribution in the creation of the United States. Although such a focus creates a unique character for a site, it necessarily denies other facets of the site's heritage and thus diminishes its appeal to visitors in a more complete history.

This single-focus approach to presenting the past at historic sites is part of a long-standing policy of non-duplication employed by the National Park Service. Each park/historic site has its own focus developed around its unique contribution to the entire park system. Historical information or structures not supporting that focus can be ignored or, in some cases, eliminated. For example, the grotto at San Antonio's Mission Nuestra Señora de la Purisma Concepción, a structure built in the early part of the 20th century, was destroyed by the NPS (despite protests from the Texas Historical Commission) because it did not pertain to the mission period.

According to James Steely, the chief historian at the Texas Historical Commission, Texas adopted the NPS policy of non-duplication in its approach to the state parks system.[1]

Steely explains that a policy which allows the elimination of some facets from the history of a site, such as the destruction of the grotto, stems from viewing history as static. Steely suggests that an alternative approach of offering the full range of each site would greatly enrich the visitors' understanding of history as a process by which each site evolves.[2] Steely is one of several people within the Texas Historical Commission who feel that opening the presentation of the past at state-owned historic sites to a more comprehensive history would allow visitors to see each site in a broader context. Such a history would enable visitors to better understand the site's relationship with other sites over time and through transitions in the region and the world.

A more inclusive history would certainly benefit and broaden the audience for the most famous historic site in Texas, the Alamo. The Alamo is an excellent example of the narrow focus, which highlights one point in history to the exclusion of others. For the last 90 years, the state-appointed custodians of the Alamo, the Daughters of the Republic of Texas (DRT), have selected from the Alamo's 300-year history a 13-day period in 1836 as their primary focus. During these 13 days, a small group of men under the leadership of William B. Travis attempted to defend the Alamo compound against the much larger Mexican army led by Santa Ana; on the 13th day, the Mexican army stormed the Alamo, and all its defenders died.

*A drill team performs in front of the Alamo during Fiesta Week.*

Although the Alamo has great significance as the first of five Spanish missions built in the San Antonio area during the 18th century, the past presented within the famous church walls focuses almost exclusively on the "thirteen days to glory" of 1836. The mission period is but a footnote in comparison. Visitors wishing substantial information about the mission period

must visit nearby mission sites administered by the National Park Service. The Alamo, from the Daughter's perspective, is a shrine to men who worked to free Texas from Mexico's control. Many Hispanic community members and visitors to the Alamo have expressed frustration with this focus, for they feel their cultural ancestry has been greatly diminished at the site. Thus, the Alamo has become a primary social target for people protesting ethnic division within the city of San Antonio, the state of Texas, and the country.

By extension, the separation becomes, for many in San Antonio, between Catholics and Protestants because the vast majority of the Hispanics in San Antonio are Catholic. The churches in the mission compounds administered by the National Park Service remain the property of the Catholic Church, and church officials still conduct services at these missions whenever they choose to do so. However, Catholic officials are not allowed to conduct religious services at the Alamo. As one DRT member explained, the only ceremonies allowed in the Alamo are those showing respect for the Alamo heroes.[3] Furthermore, any group conducting ceremonies or performing on the state-owned property in front of the Alamo must reinforce the military/memorial focus the DRT has established for the site.

The Daughters carefully control who may use the state-owned property and how it is used. The Daughters hold a memorial serivce on the anniversary of the 1836 battle (March 6), and they allow only two other groups to use the site on an annual, pre-approved basis: The Texas Cavaliers and the Order of the Alamo. The members of both groups are wealthy businessmen in San Antonio, and both groups are exclusively Anglo, with considerable cross-over membership. By permission of the DRT, the Alamo has served as a staging group for these groups' ceremonies since the early 1900s. Thus, the site has come to represent for many in the San Antonio community wealthy Anglos within the city.

Within the last three decades, protest to the Alamo's Anglo orientation has been steadily gaining strength, and the Daughters are now listening to the protestors' demands that the Alamo's public history be more inclusive. Recently, the DRT commissioned the design and construction of the "Alamo Wall of History" consisting of six free-standing panels outlining the history of the Alamo compound from the mission period to the present. This structure stands outside and to the left of the church, deep within state-owned property. It is not visible from Alamo Plaza, the city-owned portion of the Alamo compound. No study has yet been done on how many visitors go back to where the wall stands, but a docent at the Alamo said that many visitors do see the wall and that several have complimented the addition.[4]

The Daughters added the Alamo Wall of History in an effort to show that they recognize the Alamo's extensive past. But the focal point of any trip to the Alamo still is, of course, the church, and there is no question that the interior of the church receives many more visitors than does this new addition. The atmosphere within the church walls remains that of a sacred memorial to military heroes. The sign inside the entrance instructs visitors to remain silent and men to remove their hats. Visitors desiring a tour gather at the designated time around a diorama depicting the Alamo compound during the 1836 battle, and here they receive the DRT-composed history of the site focused on the famous battle. Situated by the entrance and the exit are clear donation boxes where visitors can see how others

*A horse-drawn carriage stops in front of the Alamo during the Centennial Battle of Flowers Parade.*

*The Texas Cavaliers prepare to crown their King Antonio.*

have shown with money their respect and appreciation for the Alamo. A DRT member explained that these boxes bring in over $90,000 each year.[5]

However, the major source of income at the Alamo is the Alamo Gift Shop where the atmosphere is much more relaxed. But the focus remains on the 1836 battle and its most famous participants. In both the Alamo church and the gift shop, the Daughters undoubtedly feel that they are offering visitors what they want, and the financial success of the Alamo as it is run by the DRT would seem to validate this assumption. The Alamo operates at a sizable profit, whereas many of the state-run historic sites operate at a deficit.

The argument of providing what Alamo visitors desire is a circular one. The presentation of the past at the state-owned part of the Alamo compound is perfect for tourists wishing to "experience" the famous Alamo battle, so the site attracts such visitors. The Daughters have created within the church an atmosphere of awe for military sacrifice as they showcase artifacts of the lives of the Alamo's heroes, with special emphasis on William B. Travis, James Bowie, and David Crockett. The diorama here holds no figurines, for this is not a place of toy soldiers but of spirited men. Visitors must wait until they enter the gift shop to relive the Disney and John Wayne images of the Alamo. Here the diorama does have figurines fighting, and here tourists can relax into a vacation mode as they entertain themselves with props for reliving the 1836 battle.

The DRT's emphasis on the siege and battle suggests a segregation of visitors, with Hispanics steered toward the other mission sites and Anglos to the Alamo. If Hispanics want to receive a significant amount of history prior to 1836 and if they wish to receive a positive sense of ancestry in San Antonio, they are much more likely to find both at the other San Antonio-area missions.

However, as mentioned above, the Daughters are beginning to listen to suggestions from the public that the Alamo's history needs to be more fully developed and, hopefully, they will continue to open the site to a more inclusive interpretation. The past offered at the Alamo should examine the site's position in the development of missions in what is now the United States, especially in relation to the other missions developed later in San Antonio. The comparison with the four "sister missions," as they are known locally, could include design, purpose, and congregations of each. The military and commercial uses of the Alamo after the 1836 battle offer more fertile ground for an extended history. And this extended history should be offered in oral and written form inside the church walls with an emphasis equal to that given the 1836 siege and battle. Only then will the vast majority of the Alamo's past—occurring before and after those revered 13 days—receive adequate recognition. The history of the Alamo is and should be a shared heritage.

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Notes

1 James Wright Steely, *Parks for Texas: Enduring Landscapes of the New Deal* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999).
2 Personal communication, 1999.
3 Personal communication with DRT member, 1990.
4 Personal communication, 1999.
5 Personal communication, 1990.

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Photos courtesy the author.